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International Outlook: Scholarship recognizes Mitchell's outreach efforts

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International Outlook

Scholarship recognizes Mitchell's outreach efforts

Stephen Mitchell's favorite time of the year is Christmas, but not for the obvious reasons.

Sure, he enjoys the fellowship with friends and family, gift-giving and holiday decorations. But it's the Christmas cards that he looks most forward to.

Mitchell gets them from all over the world — India, Argentina, Russia and Africa. Holiday greetings from every continent have been received at his long-time home on Atwood Street in downtown Greenville.

The cards, letters and photographs are from former students who attended a college or university in Upstate South Carolina with the help of a Rotary International Scholarship. A 1961 charter member of Greenville's Pleasantburg Rotary Club, Mitchell was named chairman of the international scholarship program that covers the Upstate in 1962, a post he held until 2000.

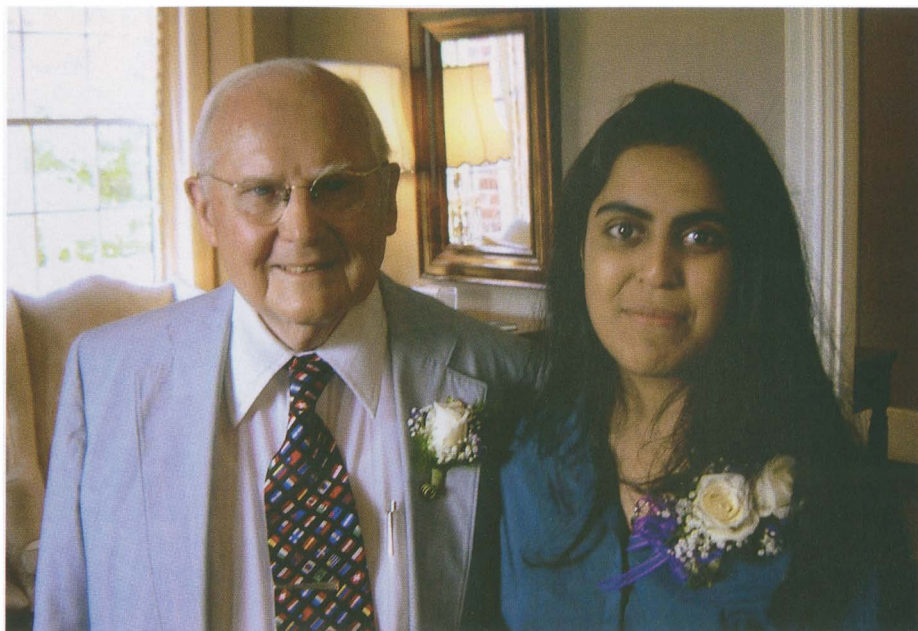
Mitchell, a lifelong bachelor, has poured much of his energy into the Rotary International scholarship and high school exchange program. He has evaluated countless scholarships, connected high school students with host families, and helped scores of international students realize the dream of attending college in the United States.

Mitchell also connects with the students on a more personal level. He is often the first person to greet the anxious teenager at the airport. He helps the student move into a residence hall and get settled. Throughout the school year, Mitchell remains in touch by taking students on weekend field trips or by hosting them at his home during the holidays. And he has heard more Commencement addresses than most university presidents.

"This has been such a wonderful experience for me," he says. "The young people are so enthusiastic. I enjoy being around them.

"I've been a bachelor all of my life and don't have any children. So I've tried to be a substitute father and advisor to the students that come over here. It's been very fulfilling."

Shortly after Mitchell stepped down as the scholarship chairman, members of the Pleasantburg Rotary Club decided to honor him by helping to establish a scholarship in his name at Furman.



Stephen D. Mitchell with Zarmeen Taherbhai, first recipient of the Mitchell Scholarship.

During the past three years, local Rotarians and Mitchell's friends at Saint James Episcopal Church and the Greenville Cotillion Club have donated to the fund. Employees at Haynsworth Sinkler Boyd, the Greenville law firm where he worked for 26 years as office manager, have also contributed to the Stephen D. Mitchell Scholarship, which is to be awarded annually to a deserving international student.

Last June Furman hosted a ceremony at Cherrydale, the university's Alumni House, to honor Mitchell and to recognize Zarmeen Taherbhai, a junior from India, as the scholarship's first recipient. A chemistry major from Pune Nahrashtram, a small town in southern India, Taherbhai plans to attend medical school.

Mitchell first became interested in international education as a Navy officer during World War II, when he was exposed to cultures that were far different from any he had encountered during his upbringing in Charleston, S.C., as the youngest of 12 children.

"I was assigned to the Pacific campaign and had the opportunity to see Australia, Japan, China, Korea and the Philippines," he says. "Subsequently, I've had the opportunity to visit many times throughout Europe and Scandinavia."

Mitchell says international exchange and scholarship programs expand horizons, provide opportunities and break down stereotypes, and he points out that most recipients return to their native countries with a favorable impression of the United States. He says he is honored that a scholarship in his name will continue to provide opportunities to international students for many years to come.

"The idea is that if we get them over here, they will be your friend for life. And it works," says Mitchell.

— John Roberts